

Interviewed by Kathi Irving, 8 August 2004, at his home at 1437 South Vernal Avenue.
Transcribed by Marilyn Hunting, November 2004

Kathleen Irving (KI): Could you tell me about your childhood and your parents?

John Shimmin: I was born in Vernal. My dad was a dentist here, Loyd, and my mother's name was Edythe. She was originally from Vernal. Her dad came from England when he was about four years old. They went to Ogden, then he came out here with some guy's herd of sheep. He stayed and eventually acquired his own herd. He stayed here till about 1929.

KI: What was your mother's maiden name?

John: Bates, her father was John Bates. He was quite active in the community, on the town council. A lot of these old brick houses around the community, on a corner of a big lot, in those days, sheep was a big industry and most of those houses were owned by someone who owned sheep. His was on the corner of First East and First North. Kitty-corner across that was John Davis, he also ran sheep. He [John Bates] came out here as a boy, he retired and moved to California.

My dad was born in Monroe, Utah. For some reason he wanted to be a dentist. He went to dental school in St. Louis.

KI: From Monroe, he graduated from high school and went to dental school?

John: In those days dental school was like two years. You didn't have to have pre-dental. It was kind of interesting. In those days dental schools were money making projects. The students would do dental work and make money for the university. He went in the Army during World War I, served for a time. He became an officer. In those days dentists and doctors just went in as privates. He went to officer candidate school and became an officer.

They needed a dentist here and he liked the small town, the outdoor life.

KI: He came straight from the service to Vernal?

John: Yes.

KI: Were he and your mother married then?

John: No. When he first came to town, he boarded in their house and I guess that is how things progressed. In those days, travelers, you'd stop in and they's put you up for the night and give you something to eat. Now they'd tell you to go to hell.

Mom taught school for a time. She went to the University of Utah. She taught here in Vernal. I can't remember her early teaching experience.

KI: When were they married?

John: Well, I was born in '26, so they were married in 1924.

KI: Are you the oldest child?

John: I'm the only child. I was born February 11, 1926.

KI: Your mom kept teaching after that? That wasn't common at that time, was it?

John: I know during World War II she taught and was active in the community then.

KI: Where did your family live and where was your father's dentist office?

John: You know where the First Security Bank is? It was the Uintah State Bank, on that corner of Main Street and Vernal Avenue. His office was upstairs, over the bank. That's where I started practicing, too, for about eight years or something like that. That old, dark hall and long stairway, you could hear the kids crying the moment they opened the door. Nowadays, things are so nice you can get them in and out before they know they've been had.

KI: Tell me about your early life. Where was your house?

John: It was 129 East 1st North. It was adjacent to the house where my grandfather lived. Actually, he owned half of the block going east and then a long ways north, a couple of blocks. He gave my parents a lot there and built a house there. It's still there, I don't know who owns it now. You know where the Kokopelli Park is? [145 East 100 North] There is the house that Franke's owned next to that, then our house was next to that, then the Bates house on the corner. It's just across from the courthouse parking lot.

KI: Tell me about your friends?

John: Sure. Kids, you know, across the street from the park, we played a lot over there, a lot of barns and things. Nowadays the parents would be horrified if their kids were out playing in the manure where there were nails and stuff. We lived.

KI: The old courthouse was there, too. That was the park you were referring too?

John: That was the only park in those days. The old courthouse, they had tennis courts when I was a little older. By the time I got out of the Army there was a swimming pool.

KI: Tell me who some of your friends were.

John: Lew Cheney, his dad was a cashier in the old Uintah State Bank. Bob Lundell, a good friend, his dad [Harold Lundell] was principal of the high school. J.D. Jones was a good friend, he came along about in the sixth grade. His dad was the manager of J.C. Penney's Company.

KI: J.C. Penney's, that was where Gales Bookstore is in the old Co-op Building [4 West Main].

John: Yes.

KI: Did you go to town much? You were so close to where the main business district was.

John: Just a block away from Main Street. When I got old enough to hunt pheasants, we could walk out our back door and walk all the way to Ashley Creek, hunting. There was no development to speak of. A lot of times we would go out before school and hunt for a while. We ate a lot of game meat in those days. My dad liked to hunt and I did as I got older.

We were pretty far out in the country in those days. Main Street wasn't even paved when I was a kid. The highway between here and Salt Lake wasn't paved either. It was just a gravel road.

KI: Did you go out there very often?

John: Oh, sometimes. It was an all day trip to Salt Lake in those days. The tires were not what they are nowadays and you had patch tires every so often. That was just part of the trip, to repair the tires.

KI: What is your first memory of a car?

John: I don't know. I remember we had a Dodge, it looked like a Model T. You know, I don't know what I remember and what I've been told.

KI: You walked to school, didn't you? You went to Central Elementary. Do you remember some of your teachers?

John: Yes. They had kind of an annex building out there. We did a little kindergarten, but it didn't amount to much. I don't think it went very long. My first grade teacher was a Miss Griffith, I thought she was really neat.

KI: When you were there, was there just one building or were there two?

John: Just one. Well, there was that little annex building but they tore it down. There was just the one building, it had four rooms on each floor. It went to grade six. John Stagg taught the sixth grade and he was the principal. We got to be the "big kids" and were up on the top floor.

KI: Do you remember any of your other teachers?

John: Pearl Shaffer, Iris White, Pearl Snyder, Sam Snyder's mother. When Herbie was a baby, she would bring him in a basket and put him behind the piano and teach school

KI: Tell me what a school day was like. Did they have a hot lunch at the time?

John: They had a hot lunch. A lot of times we didn't like it very much. A lot of times we'd take our own lunch, didn't go home much for lunch.

KI: What games did you play?

John: Oh, I don't know. Baseball, marbles, different ball games.

KI: Was there playground equipment?

John: Doesn't seem like there was a whole lot. There were chinning bars and teeter-totters, I think. We just played.

KI: What were your favorite subjects?

John: I always liked science and math. I liked English and history, too.

KI: Did you decide pretty early that you wanted to be a dentist?

John: No. When I was in high school I liked science classes. In college I didn't have a definite commitment at that time. I was pretty well in that area, my dad was a dentist, so I started taking a pre-dental course.

KI: You graduated from Uintah High School, didn't you? At that time, it was over where the swimming pool is now.

John: Yes, there were two buildings. One was a Jr. High and one was the high school. I went there for both Jr. high and high school.

KI: Were you ever bused to school or did you always have to walk?

John: I don't know how far out you had to live, but none of the kids in town got bused. The Siddoways out on Ashley Creek, they didn't get bussed.

KI: How did they get to school?

John: Took a car usually. I had a bike, or a lot of times walked.

KI: What kind of activities did you do in high school?

John: I was in the band. I played a trumpet. We went on some good trips as a marching band.

KI: At the time, what was the big time sport?

John: Probably basketball. They started six-man football, but they didn't have a big enough school for a program. I think they were about fifty people that graduated, not like today.

KI: When did you graduate?

John: 1944. I went right in the Army after graduation.

KI: Do you remember very much impact that living during through the Depression had?

John: Well, you sure didn't have any money to speak of. You made do, patched up and repaired. My dad would get chickens, a pig or a half a beef, coal. That was pretty common.

KI: So you graduated in 1944 and went immediately into the Army? You enlisted?

John: It was kind of funny. In those days you had to sign up for the draft. They didn't have any volunteer enlistments anymore at that time. I got a job at Calder's Creamery. They had an ice cream freezer with a big ammonia tank that would get very cold and after it was on for a while it would get covered with ice and frost. I walked by it one morning, my hand was damp and I bumped it and my hand stuck. I didn't want to pull it off and tear off the skin, so I called for a guy to come and get me off and he threw a can of cold water on it and that made it freeze hard. By the time he got a hot water hose over there, my hand was in pretty bad shape. In June I was walking around with my hand all bandaged up and I thought, "Hell, I'm not going to get much of a job this summer, nothing to do." So I went to the draft board to take me. By the time I got in, my hand was healed up.

KI: Tell me about your military experiences.

John: I went in in July 1944. I went to Fort Riley, Kansas, for basic training.

KI: At the time you went into the service, that late in the war, was there a prevailing feeling in the country that the war was winding down or did people feel that there was still going to be years of a war to fight?

John: In my memory, there was still a lot of hard battles ahead. In July of '44 they had just made the landing in D-Day. We had four months of basic training in mechanized cavalry base.

KI: What was that?

John: Half-tracks and armored cars.

KI: They were still calling it cavalry, though?

John: That was a cavalry station. When I got there I had the choice of either horse cavalry or mechanized cavalry. I didn't particularly enjoy the idea of all the horse manure, so I opted for the mechanized. It turned out, from my point of view, to be a pretty good thing. The kids that got the horse cavalry, they went to the South Pacific in the infantry and I went to Germany on a tank crew.

KI: Was it hard to be in Germany right at the end of the war?

John: I went over in January of 1945 and I got assigned to a tank crew in the armored division. We were active in that till the Germans surrendered in May. We went from Belgium up as far east as the Elbe River, Magdeburg, then we went into Berlin and occupied that for a month. These people were not in the best shape, their country had really been beat up. Some of these towns we would go through, there wouldn't be anything higher than that, standing, you know. A chimney here and there would be sticking up a ways. People were hungry.

KI: How did the civilians treat you?

John: The German people, I thought, were nice. A lot of times we would move into a house and either move them out or take half of it and give them half. Actually, we didn't have any hostility like you see in Iraq now.

KI: Did you have anything to do with the concentration camps?

John: One time we were going along and came to this prison camp of some sort. We took the tank and knocked down the gate. A couple of people came out that looked pretty scrawny; we didn't stop.

KI: I think they had camp in Magdeburg. At the end of the war they moved a lot of those people who were in Germany further east. They put them on marches that killed them off as well.

How long were you in the service after the war?

John: We came back to the states and were going to retrain and get new equipment and new people. They had us scheduled to invade Japan. Of course, that never happened. I got out in July of 1946. I was over there eleven or twelve months, a total of about two years, a little bit under two years.

We were on occupation for a little while. After the combat portion was over, we'd just move around and be stationed in these little towns and be on patrol and things. Then they found I could type.

KI: Who taught you to type? Did you learn to type here?

John: Yeah, in the eighth grade.

KI: Who was your teacher?

John: Gus Gee.

KI: I have heard so many people tell me that they learned to type when they were here in school, so I'm not surprised by that.

John: They asked me if I would go in the office and be a clerk-typist instead of being on the tank crew. I decided to try that. At that point all the older men were starting to come home. They had a point system: how long you were in, how old you were, whether you were married, what combat you had been in and everything. The high-point men came home first. I was a low-point man.

They had an accounting system that was just terrible. The company records were kept in a trunk, like a steamer trunk. It had been that way since the division left the U.S. for the invasion of Africa. The trunk with all the old records went with the company through the Africa campaign, Sicily, England, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. There was an accumulation of paperwork from all that time, just like a closet at home. I was there long enough to learn my way through the mess when the older guys started leaving. Of course, the bulk of the personnel had changed and many of the forms were obsolete or changed. It was just a total mess. I think I threw away about ninety-five percent of the stuff.

KI: Where were you stationed at that time?

John: Well let's see, we were Magdeburg, then Berlin, then we came to Frankfurt. I can't remember, it was someplace in Germany. Anyway, it came right down to the point where I would be transferred to another outfit so the division could come home. I was the only person in the battalion that could figure out the office system, so I got to come home with them a little early. I came in January and the younger guys didn't get to come home till that summer or fall.

KI: Where did you come home to?

John: I went to Camp Hood in Texas. I guess I got home in May not July.

KI: Did you see any heavy combat while you were in Germany?

John: Yeah. From about January till May we were in a lot of battles. I didn't get hurt.

KI: Later, you came home to Vernal, I imagine. Then what did you do?

John: I got a job working in construction, then I started school that fall.

KI: Did you enjoy your time in school?

John: Yeah. I was kind of a book worm. I thought I had to catch up, missing a couple of years, so I studied a lot. I knew if I got in dental school, I would have to have good grades. All the GIs, just out of the Army and all, wanted a career. Competition was pretty stiff. I had to make up my mind and pay the price. I started out on the GI Bill, they paid us \$65 a month. The tuition at the University of Utah was \$35 a quarter.

KI: Even when I went to school in '74 it was \$125 a quarter.

John: Gee, it's like \$350 *an hour* up here now.

KI: My son goes to Utah State University and tuition was almost \$1400 this year, but then they have to pay a lot of fees for everything and that pushes it up to almost \$2000 a semester. Did you meet your wife before school or after school?

John: It was after. I was married before. After I got out of school in 1955 we were married for ten years. Then two years after that, I married Linda. I had known her a little before that.

KI: While you were in college, did you join a fraternity?

John: A dental fraternity, yes. We were in school like ten hours a day. The older dental school would take big classes, 150 people in each class, and then [many would] flunk out and maybe only forty or fifty would graduate. This school that I went to, they were very careful on their screening so we only lost two I think. We just had a small class to start with, fifty or fifty-two. This was the University of Washington in Seattle. They really poured it on, we were in class for ten hours a day.

KI: What did your father think about that, having gone through what you would have considered at the time to be, for him, pretty easy schooling?

John: I think he was pleased. Well, you know after World War II, all kinds of information and technology just exploded. That was true in the dental area, too. After two years we started working on patients half of the time, that was more interesting. We had a brand new dental school, sort of a model for the rest of the country. Some of the other schools I looked at were old, run down and dilapidated. This was really a beautiful new building, the clinical area was really neat, good equipment. I felt we really got a good education. I graduated in 1952.

KI: Did you just decide to come back here and practice with your Dad?

John: Yes, I did.

KI: Were there other dentists here at that time?

John: Yes, there was Dr. Stevens. You know Helen Hackler, Ruth Stevens, they were nurses. [Dr. J.W. Stevens was their father.] Dr. [Dan] Price, he got started. I graduated in '52 and he graduated in '51. I don't remember just how long after, Dr. [R.K.] Murri came.

KI: Were you overwhelmed with patients?

John: When I first started out, we were busy from day one. Of course, the old equipment we had then, we weren't as productive as we are now. We didn't have the high-speed drills, prevention, they hadn't started on fluoride or home care. We had a whole lot of catch-up to do.

In 1959 they were going to tear down the old bank building and build a new building, so we had to move. I bought a little piece of property from Jolleys, in between the mortuary and the church; that little building there that is the flower shop [41 East 100 North]. I built that and practiced there for about seventeen years or so.

Then we built the building on 100 South and 300 West. I practiced there for twenty-eight years. I didn't think I would ever be there that long. I practiced fifty-one years all together. I don't think anyone else has lasted that long.

KI: What things did you see that may have been changes or improvements in the field?

John: In those days I think they told us that like sixty-five percent of your income would come from dentures. We did a lot of extractions, a lot of dentures. Only ten percent of people over sixty-five would have their own teeth. The better treatment has just about turned that over. Now it's possible, if people do what they can, they can keep their teeth all their life.

A lot of the patients are the grandchildren of the ones I started with. It's kind of neat, over a long period of time, to build up some neat relationships.

KI: Is there anything you have specialized in?

John: You know, being in a small town in those days, I felt like I had to do everything. I did. Now we have two oral surgeons that come to town. Used to be I would do wisdom teeth. That was something we did every day, extractions. Then that kind of diminished. Now we have orthodontists in town that we didn't used to have. I did a little orthodontia.

In the college in Rangely, the hygienist school, the dentist in charge of that had some orthodontics and he left and came over and wanted me to complete some of these cases he had started, so he gave me a one-day course in orthodontics. I got a little involved. Then about that time Clair Hopkins started to come out here and I was happy that he could take over the orthodontics here. He grew up here in Vernal. His dad had the Commercial Hotel.

KI: Can you remember any special events that may have happened in the community? What were the big times?

John: I remember when they paved the main street. They had a big dance in the middle of town. I was just a young boy then. The Doughboy statue in the park used to be in the middle of the intersection on Main Street; the cars would have to go around it. Tom Johnston, he owned the Rexall Drug, he had an old dog that used to sleep out there by the Doughboy statue. He didn't get run over.

KI: That's something interesting about small towns. What businesses do you remember on Main Street?

John: The banks, Bank of Vernal, Uintah State Bank. Ashton Brothers was always there. The library was in a little cubby hole on Main Street, west.

KI: Did you go in there a lot? Who was the librarian?

John: Yeah. We used the library a lot. Gladys Phillips, I think, was a librarian but I don't remember the time frame.

Hatches had a meat market next to the Vernal Drug. Rexall Drug, there was the two

drugstores.

KI: Both theaters were on Main Street.

John: The [Vogue] Theater, it seemed like it was always there. I remember going in there when I was a kid. A lot of the pictures in those days didn't have sound. Sometimes they'd have a piano player down front that would accompany them. Fran Feltch, he built the Main Theater across the street, that was in high school days.

There were a lot of hotels; the Gipson Hotel was kitty-corner across from the old post office building. Hadlocks had a blacksmith shop there. There used to be a couple of blacksmith shops. They would shoe horses and do metal work. There used to be all these hitching posts on Main Street. People would come with their horses and wagons. The old First Ward chapel stood where the hospital is and the Indians used to come and camp in the vacant lot. I remember them gambling and playing Monte, whatever they do.

There was the old Cobble Rock station that has been restored. There used to be a barber shop and a beauty shop and a little café there.

KI: Do you remember the name of that café?

John: I sure don't.

KI: I've asked so many people and they just don't remember the name of it. Mabel Neiberger told me she was waitress there.

Was Ashtons the big place to shop?

John: Yeah. There were smaller stores, dress shops, a little café just above Ashton's. There was an old hotel over on Vernal Avenue. Imperial Hall was there. I guess you've got stuff on that.

KI: Did you ever go to dances there?

John: Oh yes. That floor was great.

KI: When you were in high school did you date much?

John: We used to go to dances and parties.

KI: Do you have children?

John: Linda and I have one boy, Danny. When I was married before we had three: Linda [Grua], Stewart, and Verna [Inman].

KI: Do any of your children live here?

John: Linda. She worked for me for a long time.

KI: Your first wife here, Renee, was also from here. You and Linda have been married for a long time.

John: Thirty-five years or something like that.

KI: What organizations did you belong to?

John: Well, when I first started practicing I joined the Jaycees, which is no longer around, the Jr. Chamber of Commerce. When I got too old for that, I joined the Lions Club briefly. Then I became a Rotarian. I was president of that club in 1969. I belonged to the Chamber of Commerce. I had a term or two of being a director. I haven't been very active the last several years. [I was in] the Dinah-Mites for a few years.

KI: What do you remember about community involvement?

John: After World War II, all the guys coming home, there was a lot of activities. Basin Sports, I remember that got started. The Jaycees had the slot machines and they did a whole lot of stuff. I got in on the tail-end of that. People started to complain about the slot machines about the time I got here and they had to take them out. But they got the hospital started, built the ball park, got a police car. Did a lot of good with that money.

I was pretty much occupied being a dentist. I did a whole lot of continuing education. It's a demanding profession. It isn't a job that you work from nine to five then forget about.

KI: Were the dentists organized to go to schools and talk to kids?

John: Yes, we used to do school exams. They have had school programs where we went to school and gave talks. I know I had a hygienist give a program or two.

KI: Also, several years ago the children's dental clinic was started. Were you associated with that?

John: I helped out over there with that till they got a dentist. In order to help get started they asked the local dentists to volunteer. Whatever dentist came in, Betty would help. She did everything. She was the manager, the dental assistant, the scheduler. She's still there and they have a dentist that comes out from Salt Lake. He isn't here all the time; like three days a week.

KI: How long have you lived in this house?

John: Danny would be thirty-five so it would be about thirty-four years here. He was real small. We bought it from Blaine Horrocks. He used to have the shoe store here.

KI: Where else did you live after you were married?

John: Fran Feltch, his old home. The block below the hotel. It isn't there any more. When we first got married, Linda had an apartment at Charlie Lewis' apartments, next to Max Stewart's

house. We lived there for a little while, then we moved into Edna Eskelson's house next to the Episcopal Church, then we finally bought this place.

KI: I guess people still live in the Eskelson house, where they used to have that little walk-way to get over to the hospital. Do you remember that?

John: You know, in the old office in the Uintah State Bank, they used to have kind of a hospital up there. Dr. Hansen, he had his office up there and it passed as a hospital for a long time, till he died. He got bucked off a horse and was killed. Joseph Hansen was his name. That would have been—he was there all the time I was a kid. I think, probably about the time I got out of school.

KI: Beth Sweatfield told me she worked there about the time of the end of the war. They tell me about all the babies they had stacked up there in the nursery.

Was there a professional dental organization?

John: They have a Uintah Basin Dental Association. The local dentists belonged to that. State officers come out once every fall and present an education program. When I first started out, I had to go to San Francisco or Los Angeles to go to a continuing education course. Now I get advertising in the mail every day for continuing courses.

KI: Did any of your children go into dentistry?

John: No. They talked about it, but they never made it. Linda applied to hygiene school after high school, but got married instead. She helped me in the office for fifteen years or something. She's still in the same office now, working for Dr. [Jason] Monfredi.

KI: Thank you so much for talking with me today. I really appreciate your time.